



Training dogs for competition and socialization

June 11, 2019

Ekaterina (Katya) Davydenko and her Belgian Malinois “Sparkles” are in a field off Overlook Park in White Rock, New Mexico. Using inflections in her voice, she commands Sparkles to sit, drop down on all fours, and walk alongside her while on and off a leash. Thinking everything is a game, Sparkles complies, his ears up and tail swinging from side to side. Davydenko then begins to teach her dog more advanced tasks, such as seeking out and retrieving objects and tracking a scented trail that is at least 20 minutes old.

“I’ve always loved the company of dogs, ever since I was a little girl,” says Davydenko, who works on software solutions for the Laboratory. “Dogs, they just have such a special bond with us. It’s a trust I would say is not the same as that between two people—it’s a much deeper connection. Dogs want so much to please you, and that makes you want to please them, too.”

Although she loves all breeds of dogs, Katya was drawn to working dogs that can help and support their human companions.

They are used to control livestock on ranches, help with military and police operations, guide the visually impaired and provide cheer and support for those confined to hospitals and retirement facilities.

“A coworker of mine is actually a founder of the Endeavor Working Dog Club, and she was responsible for me beginning my journey in training working dogs,” says Katya. “I remember she had a bunch of pictures in her office of such training, and I was, ‘Wow, what is this?’ In response, she invited me out to Overlook Park to watch dog training first hand, and from that point on I became a regular participant.”

Training as a competition

Katya learned all about the dog-training competition known as IGP (German for Internationale Gebrauchshund Pruefung, which means “International Working Dog Test”), which tests obedience, tracking and protection. Katya has trained two dogs in this type of training, Max (a Doberman-Boxer mix who is now retired) and Sparkles.

“There are judged competitions where trainer and dog are put through a variety of challenges to obtain a certain degree, or rank, of trained proficiency,” says Davydenko.

“I successfully competed with my dog Max for several years, but he got too old for competition, so now he’s retired,” Davydenko says with a laugh. “I am now competing

with my new dog, Sparkles. We participated in an April 2019 competition, but Sparkles did not pass the tracking portion. So, training continues—it truly never ends, actually.”

Giving dogs a helping hand

From early 2013 to late 2015, Davydenko also volunteered at the Los Alamos Animal Shelter. As a fledgling dog trainer, she wanted to try her hand at training other breeds of dogs, spending her lunch hours teaching them basic obedience and socializing them so they were not wary of human contact.

“Many of the dogs at the shelter, they’ve had some difficult experiences,” Davydenko explains. “My goal was to make them more adaptable, social, so it would be easier to find them good homes. It’s interesting that it was much easier to work with high-energy dogs than it was for those who were shy or had shut down and just wanted to be left alone. Reaching these withdrawn dogs and making them social again—it was a satisfying and great experience for me.”

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